

Shumlin says the state can't wait for answers from FEMA, his administration will go ahead with \$170 million in projects

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by Anne Galloway

The state is no closer to determining just how much money FEMA will make available for the reconstruction of the Waterbury State Office Complex and the Vermont State Hospital.

Gov. Peter Shumlin met with FEMA officials newly assigned to Vermont on Wednesday and he said he was told the federal agency is not ready to give the state a dollar amount for reimbursements for the two construction projects more than a year after Tropical Storm Irene heavily damaged the buildings in Waterbury.

"I expressed to them my extreme frustration with the slow pace, with the extraordinary bureaucracy and with a lack of answers after a year of plenty of pain on behalf of Vermonters," Shumlin said. "In addition to the frustration, I think we made some progress with the new team in understanding how badly we need answers now. We are going to continue to work closely with FEMA and get Vermont what it deserves to rebuild communities, to rebuild the state office complex and to rebuild the state hospital and a mental health delivery system as quickly as we know how."

Shumlin said the state can wait no longer. State employees are traveling too far to offices that are inadequate; the town of Waterbury is losing businesses because fewer workers are in town to buy goods and services; and the state's most acutely ill mental health patients continue to turn to emergency rooms for help.

Shumlin told the state's press corps that his administration will go ahead with \$170 million worth of projects: \$145 million for a new state office building and \$45 million for mental health facilities.

He is hoping FEMA will give the state \$80 million to \$90 million for the Waterbury complex and \$15 million to \$20 million for a new Vermont State Hospital in Berlin and smaller mental health expansion projects at four community facilities around the state. The state set aside \$29 million in the capital bill for the projects. In addition, officials are still wrangling with the insurance company over a reimbursement figure.

Shumlin said he had made the decision to break ground for the state hospital this fall. The expanded facilities at the Brattleboro Retreat and Rutland Regional Medical Center are under way.

The state may have to scale back its plans for the office complex, he said, if FEMA funding is less than expected, but the governor said Plan B, which entails building a new structure that would accommodate about 900 employees is his preference. In the worst case scenario, the new office building would be constructed for about 800 workers. He

said he would not consider reusing the existing buildings damaged by the storm for state workers.

The state is looking to form public/private partnerships for reuse of the old structures. It's possible, for example, that the Waterbury town offices, ruined in the flood, may be located in one of the buildings. An affordable housing group is interested in another.

One reporter asked if the timing of the press conference was related to the governor's campaign efforts.

Shumlin said Irene shouldn't be a political issue. He compared the impact of Irene on the state to the effect of a war on the national psyche. Vermonters, he said, should rally around the people who are still suffering in the aftermath of the storm. "One thing we can agree on is we are all united on Irene. Irene isn't about the election," Shumlin said.

When asked whether or not he had made any mistakes, Shumlin replied that "I don't believe we've made mistakes. We're going ahead, and this is an example of our determination to move ahead."

"Anyone who politicizes Irene does so at his own peril," he said, making an oblique reference to his Republican rival, Randy Brock.

Brock, as it turns out, was waiting nearby, standing behind reporters as the governor finished the presser.

The Franklin County senator told reporters that he thought the Shumlin administration had made mistakes with regard to the handling of the post-Irene crisis. He said Shumlin didn't have contingency plans in place this spring, even though in February FEMA officials said they would not guarantee funding for the state's plans for the office complex and state hospital.

When asked, Brock did not offer contingency plans of his own. As a challenger, he has said he doesn't have the resources to do so.